

Swearing an Oath to Veterans and Exposing Cruel Partisan Gamesmanship: Jon Stewart's Strategically Uncivil and Profane Diatribe in Support of the 2022 PACT Act

Thomas A. Salek*

On July 28, 2022, comedian and activist Jon Stewart excoriated obstructionist Republican senators for blocking the passage of the PACT Act, legislation that would have provided healthcare and benefits to nearly 3.5 million veterans who were exposed to toxic substances during their time in the service. As a rhetorical leader, Stewart used his celebrity ethos to help generate publicity for the PACT Act and the partisan gamesmanship that stalled the legislation's passage. To reach a nonpartisan audience, Stewart's rhetoric shifted the exigency from the failure of the PACT Act's passage to the broader threat of cruel partisan politicians who worked against the welfare of selfless veterans. By reframing the exigency, using profanity, and deploying the diatribe, Stewart's speech blamed lawmakers for creating an obscene political scene that subjugated the interests of the country and welfare of veterans in favor of partisan extremism. I argue that Stewart's rhetoric used a nonpartisan dissociation argument as a wedge for political transformation by encouraging Americans to abandon obscene and cruel partisan gamesmanship. To ameliorate this political environment, Stewart offered lawmakers and citizens a choice about the future: help vulnerable veterans and fulfill the country's foundational principles or maintain cruel partisan gamesmanship that worked against members of the military and the will of the American people.

Keywords: Diatribe, Dissociation, Mortification, Profanity, Rhetorical Leadership

Flanked by war veterans, on July 28, 2022, comedian and activist Jon Stewart stood in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol to excoriate Republican Senators for blocking a bill that would have provided healthcare coverage for nearly 3.5 million veterans who were exposed to toxic substances during their time in the armed forces. "Ain't this a bitch," Stewart fumed as he stood in the hot July heat. "America's heroes, who fought in our wars, outside sweating their asses off...battling all kinds of ailments, while these motherfuckers sit in the air conditioning, walled off from any of it."¹ While Stewart's invective commentary may sound like a mere partisan character assault, the rhetor's frustration tapped into supporting legislation popular with the American public—the bill blocked by obstructionist lawmakers had the approval of more than 90 percent of citizens.² Moreover, in June of 2022, a bipartisan group of senators also favored the legislation, with 84 supporting an

* Thomas A. Salek (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Media at Elmhurst University. The author can be reached by email at Thomas.Salek@gmail.com.

¹ All quotes have been transcribed by the author from The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit! Jon on the PACT Act Being Blocked by the Senate," YouTube Video, 9:27, July 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uPqYhklzrA>

² Ellie DeCleene, "Voters Strongly Support the Bipartisan Honoring Our PACT Act," *Data for Progress*, July 21, 2022, <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2022/7/12/voters-strongly-support-the-bipartisan-honoring-our-pact-act>

earlier draft of the bill known as the PACT Act. Despite this broad support, when the bill was advancing through the Senate in July for a final vote, 25 Republicans pulled their backing, voting against an updated version, stalling the bill from becoming law. Following this procedural halt, Stewart, veterans, and activists made their way from the Senate gallery to the National Mall to voice their anger and frustration to members of the media and American citizens.

Stewart's speech highlights a form of rhetorical activism where profanity, character attacks, and the diatribe were strategically deployed to critique obstructionist lawmakers and the partisan gamesmanship that stalled the PACT Act's passage. Since the Communication discipline's origins, scholars have outlined the value of rhetoric when aiding advocates who seek to evoke social change. For example, Zarefsky explains that advocates can harness rhetorical leadership by "giving voice to a view of the world that offers audiences different and better ways of seeing their own situation."³ Likewise, Olson explains that celebrities or politicians can harness their ethos and rhetoric as a means to spur change on an issue in which they may have no formal position of authority or expertise.⁴ The concept of rhetorical leadership highlights how communication can be harnessed as an appropriate means to address one's rhetorical situation. Bitzer explains the value of rhetoric in these situations, stating that advocates can use their communication "to produce action or change in the world," hereby "altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action."⁵ In order for change to be spurred, a rhetorical leader uses communication to address an exigency or problem marked by urgency, highlight the need for change, and empower an audience.

As a rhetorical leader, Stewart used his celebrity ethos and communication style to help generate publicity for the PACT Act and the partisan gamesmanship that stalled the legislation's passage. Moreover, to reach a nonpartisan audience, Stewart's speech shifted the exigency from the failure of the PACT Act's passage to the broader threat of cruel partisan politicians who worked against the welfare of vulnerable veterans. By reframing the exigency, using profanity, and deploying the diatribe, Stewart's rhetoric blamed selfish lawmakers for creating an obscene political scene that subjugated the interests of the country and welfare of selfless veterans. I argue that Stewart's rhetoric used a nonpartisan dissociation argument as a wedge for political transformation by encouraging Americans to abandon obscene and cruel partisan gamesmanship in favor of a commitment to America's foundational principles. Avoiding the scourge of partisanship that stymied passage of the PACT Act, Stewart offered lawmakers and citizens a choice about America's future: help vulnerable veterans and fulfill the country's foundational principles or maintain cruel partisan gamesmanship that worked against members of the military and the will of the American people. The first part of this article outlines Stewart's rhetorical situation and style. In the second part, I analyze the July 28, 2022 speech, demonstrating how Stewart's argument was constituted via profanity, the diatribe, mortification, and dissociation. Finally, I end by stressing that Stewart used his speech to craft a newsworthy and nonpartisan argument for how citizens could move beyond a state of ultra-partisanship that harmed vulnerable citizens and worked against American values.

³ David Zarefsky, "Lincoln's 1862 Annual Message," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 3, no. 1 (2000), 6.

⁴ Kathryn M. Olson, "Rhetorical Leadership and Transferable Lessons for Successful Social Advocacy in Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 44, no. 1 (2007), 91.

⁵ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1, no. 1 (1968), 4.

Jon Stewart as Comedian, Activist, and Rhetorical Leader

Although Stewart may be mostly known for satirizing politics and news during his time hosting *The Daily Show* (1999-2015 and 2024 -), since September 11, 2001, the comedian has been an advocate for victims of the 2001 terrorist attacks, first responders, veterans, and military families. In the aftermath of September 11, the comedian worked alongside and on behalf of victims to help secure funding for illnesses caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In 2010 and 2015, Stewart created viral news moments by chastising members of Congress for not appropriating additional financing for the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund.⁶ After ending his first tenure on *The Daily Show*, the comedian continued his advocacy by working on behalf of veterans sickened by exposure to toxic chemicals while serving. Stewart's activism for veterans was prominent in the first episode of his Apple TV+ show, *The Problem with Jon Stewart* (2021- 2023). Throughout the episode, Stewart interviewed experts and explained the types of toxic substances veterans have been exposed to while serving, as well as the difficulty many have had securing healthcare to treat illnesses detected years later.⁷

Following the Apple TV+ episode, Stewart's activism went beyond the airwaves and to Capitol Hill. Working with veterans' groups, Stewart lobbied Congress in private and public to pass the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins Act of 2022. More commonly known as the PACT Act, the bill provided healthcare and benefits to veterans sickened by open-air military burn pits and other toxic fumes.⁸ For decades, the Department of Veteran Affairs refused to acknowledge that pits used to burn garbage, jet fuel, and other toxic materials had the potential to cause cancer, respiratory issues, and lung disease. The PACT Act provided approximately \$600 million of funding, expanded medical and disability benefits for veterans suffering from cancer and respiratory issues related to toxic exposure.⁹ Stewart's activism on behalf of this cause reached its apex in the summer of 2022 with his verbal tirade outside the Capitol on July 28, 2022.¹⁰

Stewart's rhetorical style and communication has mostly been explored by scholars for his role as a comedian. Waisanen states that Stewart's use of satire and social commentary highlights a form of pop culture rhetoric. He explains that Stewart is an exemplar of civil argumentation by "teach[ing] us that a public sphere is healthy to the extent that participants can engage in vigorous debate and reflective advocacy, take perspectives of others, and make critiques in a playful rather than combative manner."¹¹ In contrast to Waisanen's take on Stewart's satire, Hart and Hartelius suggest that the comedian's rhetoric lies in the realm of cynicism. As such, they argue, it "does

⁶ See Michael Gold, "How Jon Stewart Became a Fierce Advocate for 9/11 Responders," *New York Times*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/12/nyregion/jon-stewart-9-11-congress.html#:~:text=Stewart%20interviewed%20a%20panel%20of,incluing%20then%20Mayor%20Michael%20R>.

⁷ *The Problem with Jon Stewart*, season 1, episode 1, "Veterans," written, hosted, and produced by Jon Stewart, aired September 30, 2022 on Apple TV+.

⁸ Congress.gov. "Text - H.R.3967 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Honoring our PACT Act of 2022." June 16, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3967/text/pcs>.

⁹ Sara Samora, "Enough is Enough": Lawmakers, Advocates Voice Anger Over Delayed Bill that would Help Vets Exposed to Toxic Burn Pits," *Stars and Stripes*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2022-07-28/pact-act-blocked-veterans-burn-pits-6797862.html>.

¹⁰ Kristin Wilson, "Jon Stewart and Democrats Rail Against Stalled Burn Pits Legislation: 'This is Bullshit.'" *CNN*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/28/politics/pact-act-burn-pits-jon-stewart/index.html>.

¹¹ Don J. Waisanen, "A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism," *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no 2 (2009), 135.

not stimulate a polis to have new and productive thoughts; like [Stewart's] ancient predecessors, he merely produces inertia."¹² Thus, Hart and Hartelius stress that Stewart's use of cynicism acts as a constraint that dulls audience members and stymies dialogue within the public sphere. Responding to Hart and Hartelius's critique, Bennett explains that while cynicism may have historically stymied political culture, it can be an active and effective tool in the modern public sphere. Bennett states that "when taken in measured doses and combined with other tools for building independent perspective, [comedic political rhetoric] may be necessary for maintaining independence of thought and action."¹³ While not exploring Stewart, Salek has explained that comedians can use their style and ethos to act as rhetorical leaders to generate publicity and public interest about important social issues.¹⁴ As a comedian, Stewart used satire on his television shows to entertain all while providing commentary and perspective to current events.

In contrast to previous studies, I explore Stewart's social activism, stressing that while his rhetoric may contain elements of his comedic style, its goal was more aligned to persuade than entertain. At a base level, Stewart's celebrity status and sense of humor helped raise the visibility of activism on behalf of 9/11 victims, first responders, and veteran groups. In most situations, Stewart's activism details facts and anecdotes in a serious tone. While the July 28, 2022 speech contained a few humorous jokes at politicians and profane language, the overall substance of Stewart's speech sought to reframe the issue of the PACT Act from being another partisan fight to a need to stand by America's veterans and core values. Thus, at first glance, Stewart's July 28, 2022 speech may have seemed like an off-the-cuff profane outburst against partisan Republican politicians. However, upon closer examination, Stewart's speech acts as a form of rhetorical leadership that sought to raise awareness about the PACT Act, personalized the dangers of partisan gamesmanship, and encourage senators and citizens to adopt a nonpartisan attitude about American politics.

In the July 28, 2022 speech, Stewart used a few tactics to express frustration and generate news headlines about the PACT Act stalling in the Senate. First, to generate news coverage, Stewart used an affective tone and profanity to break the norms of civility, constitute public controversy, and point out the absurdity of partisan politicians blocking a bill widely popular among both Democrats and Republicans. Similarly, Stewart used the diatribe and name-calling to craft an argument that used anger and frustration to craft newsworthy statements. Rather than just placing blame in the hands of politicians, Stewart's speech relied on mortification to constitute guilt among all Americans, urging them to rally behind a revitalized American community that supported selfless veterans. To complete his nonpartisan appeal, Stewart's speech used dissociation to offer citizens a choice between two futures—a cruel and inhumane America that threatened the welfare of its citizens versus a humane, common-sense Republic focused on its people and steeped in the country's foundational principles. Working in tandem, these tactics provided Stewart a platform to castigate lawmakers for failing to pass the PACT Act, as well as generate news headlines on the controversy.

¹² Roderick P. Hart and Johanna Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007), 264.

¹³ W. Lance Bennett, "Jon Stewart's Comedy in an Age of Cynicism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007), 283.

¹⁴ Thomas A. Salek, "Flipping Off Political Complacency and Cynicism: *Satyrical* Satire as a Comic Corrective in Bill Maher's 2014 #FlipADistrict Campaign," *Comedy Studies* 14, no. 1 (2023), 116.

Using Profanity to Create an Uncivil and Newsworthy Diatribe

While profanity and incivility have traditionally been shunned by classical notions of rhetorical theory, contemporary scholars have explained that both civility and incivility can help or hinder debate.¹⁵ For example, Herbst explains that civility and incivility can be used as strategic forms of communication that help advance a rhetor's cause. Unlike other theorists who connect civility and incivility to social and cultural norms surrounding etiquette or politeness, Herbst points out the rhetorical value for each resides in the situation and communication act itself.¹⁶ Moreover, Benson aptly argues that "incivility is itself a tactic in political discourse, employed as an indicator of sincerity, as a marker of the high stakes in a disagreement."¹⁷ Contemporary scholars have also posited the practical uses of profane speech in public argumentation. For example, Rothwell creates a typology for profanity, stating that in a mediated society, swearing can be used to: 1) create attention, 2) discredit those in power, 3) provoke a response, 4) create interpersonal identification, or 5) provide catharsis.¹⁸ As an advocate, Stewart did not use profanity for comedic effect, instead swearing was strategically used as a means to highlight his sincerity, cast the failure of the PACT Act as obscene, and help draw attention to an issue that may have been overlooked by members of the media and citizens.

To rhetorically constitute the underlying exigency of the PACT Act stalling in the Senate, in the July 28, 2022 speech, Stewart cast obstructionist Republican lawmakers as cruel villains who manipulated the Congressional system for partisan gain. Stewart noted that rather than speaking to veterans after voting to stall the legislation, a number of lawmakers hid in their offices away from public scrutiny. Stewart chided this behavior, profanely exclaiming "these motherfuckers sit in the air conditioning, walled off from any of it. They don't have to hear it. They don't have to see it. They don't have to understand that these [veterans] are human beings. Do you get it yet?"¹⁹ Casting blame on obstructionist Republicans, Stewart's use of profanity emphasized that veterans were victims of selfish and obscene politicians who acted out of partisan impulse.

To make his case to the American people and news media, Stewart's speech made strategic use of uncivil and profane statements to stress that the PACT Act's failure was an act of obscene partisanship. According to Stewart, a group of selfish lawmakers blocked the bill to increase their leverage as a means to attach the widely popular and bipartisan bill to other legislation that was strictly partisan. While Stewart's invective tone could be described as a mere character attack against lawmakers who blocked the PACT Act, its use highlights a positive constraint he used to advocate on behalf of veterans. By strategically breaking the norms of civility and using profane language, Stewart's use of swearing helped draw a contrast between selfless veterans and selfish lawmakers.

¹⁵ Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011), 23; Christopher R. Darr, "Adam Ferguson's Civil Society and the Rhetorical Functions of (In)Civility in United States Senate Debate," *Communication Quarterly* 59, no. 5 (2011), 609. Susan Herbst, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 4-10.

¹⁶ Herbst, *Rude Democracy*, 4-10.

¹⁷ Benson, "Rhetoric of Civility," 27.

¹⁸ J Dan Rothwell, "Verbal Obscenity: Time for Second Thoughts," *Western Speech* 35, no. 4 (1971), 232-239.

¹⁹ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

In addition to drawing a contrast between veterans and lawmakers, Stewart's use of profanity and character attacks helped raise awareness of the issue in nearly all major news outlets.²⁰ At the same time, the rhetor's use of profanity provided linguistic evidence that the current political scene was obscene because cruel lawmakers were acting against the welfare of America's troops and will of citizens. Thus, by breaking the norms of civility by swearing, Stewart's profane rhetoric created unusual and conflict-based news worth reporting. For example, following his July 28, 2022 speech, CNN reported on the stalled bill with the headline, "Jon Stewart and Democrats rail against stalled burn pits legislation: 'This is bullshit.'"²¹ Likewise, *Fox News* ran a story on the speech with the headline, "Jon Stewart blasts Senate Republicans over veterans burn pits bill."²² Additionally, *Rolling Stone* titled their article on the event with a quote from Stewart's speech, "'If This is America First, Then America is F – ked!' Jon Stewart Blasts GOP Over Vote Against Vets."²³ Using his celebrity status and profanity, Stewart's speech created headline-worthy statements about the PACT Act and its stalling in the Senate.

Stewart's speech was not only picked up by members of the media but it's profane and uncivil tactics also served as a rhetorical unifying principle for supporters. Rothwell explains that profanity can be used as an organizing tool by rhetors to "create identification between agitators and potential allies."²⁴ This kind of identification and similar use of language can be seen in Democratic lawmakers and advocates in favor of the bill. In addition to Stewart, New York Senator Kristen Gillibrand chided, "This is total bullshit," adding, "This is the worst form of overt politicization I've literally seen. This is total BS. We have the votes [to pass the PACT Act]."²⁵ Similarly, Susan Zeier, the mother-in-law of a veteran who died because of toxin exposure, exclaimed, "They don't give a shit about veterans."²⁶ For Stewart and other advocates, not only did profanity help generate headlines, but foul language also served as an identification principle and rhetorical articulation of the sheer absurdity surrounding the PACT Act's blockage.

Along with providing a sense of newsworthiness, profanity allowed Stewart to use socially unacceptable speech as a means to refer to the absurd failure of a bill that had the support of more than 90 percent of the American people. Scholars stress that profane language can be deployed to serve as an extreme critique of those in power. Rothwell states,

²⁰ See Melissa Chan, Phil McCausland and Daniel Arkin, "Blindsided veterans erupt in fury after Senate GOP tanks toxic burn pit bill," *NBC News*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/blindsided-veterans-erupt-fury-senate-republicans-suddenly-tank-pact-a-rcna40516>; Eleanor Watson, "Veterans shocked burn pit legislation fails to advance in Senate," *CBS News*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/burn-pits-legislation-senate-fail-veterans-jon-stewart/>; Leo Shane III, "Angry veterans advocates scramble to save toxic exposure bill after surprise setback," *Military Times*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/burn-pits/2022/07/28/angry-veterans-advocates-scramble-to-save-toxic-exposure-bill-after-surprise-setback/>.

²¹ Kristin Wilson, "Jon Stewart and Democrats Rail Against Stalled Burn Pits Legislation: 'This is Bullshit.'" *CNN*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/28/politics/pact-act-burn-pits-jon-stewart/index.html>

²² Louis Casiano, "Jon Stewart Blasts Senate Republicans Over Veterans Burn Pits Bill." *Fox News*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/jon-stewart-blasts-senate-republicans-veterans-burn-pits-bill>

²³ Nikki McCann Ramirez, "'If This is America First, Then America is F – ked!' Jon Stewart Blasts GOP Over Vote Against Vets," *Rolling Stone*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/jon-stewart-blasts-gop-over-vote-against-vets-1389372/>

²⁴ Rothwell, "Verbal Obscenity," 233.

²⁵ Quoted in Wilson, "Jon Stewart and Democrats Rail Against Stalled Burn Pits Legislation."

²⁶ Quoted in Wilson, "Jon Stewart and Democrats Rail Against Stalled Burn Pits Legislation."

Verbal obscenity provides the most jolting, evocative stimulus to society; the style of dissent is outrageousness. Anything less can be easily dismissed. A milder form of verbal abuse may prove to be equally effective in gaining attention, but this in no way negates the fact that obscenity draws attention to itself as well as to those using it. Although this may not be a unique function of verbal obscenity, it is nevertheless its initial purpose.²⁷

Likewise, Jordan explains that while traditional notions of civility encourage rhetors to avoid profanity, swearing can be used as a tool for social advocacy. He argues, “profanity expresses a kind of emotion unavailable through regular language.”²⁸ In extreme circumstances where traditional notions of logic or civility are unavailable or undesirable, profanity can be a helpful tool to address the direness of the situation. Jordan stresses, “When our world has been upended, profanity may right us.”²⁹ While profanity may not fit traditional notions of civility, in extreme circumstances, foul language can be used by a rhetor to provide a harsh rebuke against something unjust. Following the PACT Act stalling in the Senate, Stewart was able to seize upon this moment of *kairos* or a timely situation. Miller explains that a *kairotic* moment presents rhetors with situations where there is a “rhetoric void” in which discourse can be used as a means to provide a uniquely fitting and timely response.³⁰ For Stewart, this moment of *kairos* presented the opportunity for profanity to be used a rhetorical constraint to help fill in the anger and irresponsibility left by lawmakers. Seizing upon a broader rhetorical situation where more than 90 percent of Americans supported the PACT Act in theory, profanity was a means to help Stewart severely criticize the shameful of lawmakers for creating an irresponsible situation that ignored the will of the American public and put the lives of veterans at risk on the homeland. In other words, at this *kairotic* moment, profanity was a fitting means to address this rhetorical situation.

Enraged at obstructionist lawmakers for their abrupt shift in support for the PACT Act, Stewart profanely admonished them, fuming, “I’ve been here a long time. Senate’s where accountability goes to die. These people don’t care. They’re never losing their jobs. They’re never losing their health care.”³¹ Stewart argued that obstructionist senators disregarded common decency and their own promises. He explained, “[The Senate] passed [a preliminary version on] June 16 [2022]. They passed the PACT Act 84 to 14. You don’t even see those scores in the Senate anymore. They passed it.”³² However, Stewart pointed to lawmakers’ callous cruelty because they broke their own promises to veterans. Stewart criticized Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, stating, “Kristina Keenan will tell you from VFW that she sat in an office with Mitch McConnell and a war veteran from Kentucky, and he looked that man in the eyes and he said, ‘We’ll get it done.’ And he lied because Mitch McConnell yesterday flipped.”³³ Stewart continued, singling out Pennsylvania Senator Pat Toomey as an example of the cruel gamesmanship affiliated with the blockage of the PACT Act. Stewart chided, Senator Toomey “is a fucking coward. You hear me? A coward. And like I say, I’m used to it. But this type of cruelty on those that we say we hold up as our most

²⁷ Rothwell, “Verbal Obscenity,” 233.

²⁸ John W. Jordan, “Profanity from the Heart as Exceptional Civil Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 2 (2020), 26.

²⁹ Jordan, “Profanity from the Heart,” 117.

³⁰ Carolyn R. Miller, “Opportunity, Opportunism, and Progress: *Kairos* in the Rhetoric of Technology,” *Argumentation* 8, no. 1 (1994), 83-84.

³¹ The Problem with Jon Stewart, “I Call Bullshit!”

³² The Problem with Jon Stewart, “I Call Bullshit!”

³³ The Problem with Jon Stewart, “I Call Bullshit!”

valued Americans, then what are we?”³⁴ Besides using profanity to rail against McConnell and Toomey, Stewart highlighted the cruelty of obstructionist Senate Republicans for stating their support for the PACT Act one day and abandoning it without reason on another. While most blame could be placed on lawmakers who voted against the PACT Act, Stewart’s rhetoric also implicated regular American citizens for their complicity by complacently supporting a cruel political environment. By asking if “we,” citizens, get it, Stewart challenged his audience. Stewart pleaded with citizens to comprehend the cruel reality of the current situation and how it conflicted with the country’s overwhelming support for America’s troops. Although citizens may not have voted to block the PACT Act, Stewart asserted their indirect complicity by voting for politicians who used unethical and irresponsible tactics that worked against the interests of the country.

To further shame senators who blocked the bill, Stewart continued to criticize Senator Toomey. Instead of helping veterans, Stewart accused the Pennsylvania senator of abdicating his sworn Congressional duties. Unlike other professions where vocational irresponsibility or inaction would get someone fired, Stewart stressed Toomey would not be punished. Moreover, Toomey would be rewarded once he retired a few months later. Stewart explained, “He’s walking away [and retiring]. God knows what kind of pot of gold he’s stepping into, to lobby this government to shit on more people. I’m used to all of it, but I’m not used to the cruelty.”³⁵ Stewart’s speech highlights the use of profanity as a rhetorical device to point out the unfair privilege afforded to those in power like Toomey. By expressing contempt, rhetors like Stewart can use profanity to help raise awareness, discredit those with power, and disrupt the status quo.³⁶ At the same time, Stewart’s speech used profanity as a means to draw attention in the news cycle to the cruelty afforded to veterans in this situation. Stewart shifted the frame from the issue from partisan cynicism to cruelty. Rather than citing the failure of the PACT Act as traditional Washington cynicism, Stewart stressed this act was unnecessary cruelty against veterans. Through this re-framing of the issue, Stewart emphasized that some lawmakers were grossly out of line with America’s values by not just cynically voting for partisan gain but cruelly stalling legislation that would help vulnerable veterans.

Throughout his speech, Stewart chided selfish lawmakers, swore an oath to selfless veterans, and addressed the role that regular American citizens could take to help ameliorate this legislative failure. Pointing at veterans in the crowd, Stewart proclaimed, “These aren’t heroes. These are men and women, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers that *we* just let stand outside in the heat when they can’t breathe.”³⁷ In the speech, Stewart constituted veterans as victims of a callous bureaucracy indifferent to their physical wellbeing. Bypassing the traditional frame of veterans as heroes who go beyond the call of duty, Stewart, instead, cast members of the military as regular Americans with family that cared about their physical and emotional wellbeing. By downplaying the notion of heroism, Stewart stressed the humanity of veterans. In other words, instead of thinking of veterans as heroes who are not in need of help because they are protectors, Stewart stressed they were just like any human who needed help every now and then. Moreover, despite suffering life-threatening health conditions, Stewart explained that a number of former troops continued to risk their own health and lives for other veterans by advocating for the passage of the PACT Act.

While Stewart cast veterans as victims of an indifferent bureaucracy, the rhetor’s emphasis on “we” signaled that American citizens were also complicit in the events leading to the stalling of

³⁴ The Problem with Jon Stewart, “I Call Bullshit!”

³⁵ The Problem with Jon Stewart, “I Call Bullshit!”

³⁶ Rothwell, “Verbal Obscenity,” 233.

³⁷ The Problem with Jon Stewart, “I Call Bullshit!”

the PACT Act. Public opinion polling at the time may have indicated that the majority of Americans supported the PACT Act and were sympathetically aligned with veterans, however, Stewart's rhetoric signaled that the obstructionist senators were not the only party complicit. Stewart stressed that citizens also played a role in the bill's blockage because they either ignored or complacently accepted that partisan gamesmanship is normal in Washington. By placing an emphasis on the word "we," Stewart didn't just excoriate lawmakers, his verbal attack included citizens for aligning themselves with politicians and political parties that worked against the interest of groups like veterans, as well as the will of the American people.

In addition to using profanity, Stewart's speech adopted the form of the diatribe to gain attention through shock value so that it could rise to the attention of the public sphere. Windt explains that the diatribe is "an attempt to criticize, to entertain, to shock and to convey impressions of public figures, all in one."³⁸ Thus, use of a diatribe is "intended to assault sensibilities" and create "shock" through the strategic use of language for the purpose of attracting an audience and then rearranging perspectives to promote change.³⁹ Likewise, Kennedy explains that a diatribe is "an 'insurgency tactic' that in its disruptive and misbehaved way highlights the political dimensions of ideal speech situations by making agency available through 'bad' behavior."⁴⁰ Thus, the "diatribe cannot be reduced to an emotional outburst. Rather, it gains character by appearing improvised in its emotional foundations; in reality, diatribe carefully calculates the opportune time to launch an impudent statement or reaction."⁴¹ Although profanity may traditionally be avoided in mainstream political rhetoric, its use within a diatribe provides rhetors an ability to "reduce conventional beliefs to the ridiculous, thereby making those who support orthodoxy seem contemptible, hypocritical, or stupid."⁴² As such, profanity within a diatribe like Stewart's can be seen as a "cleansing force to purge preconceptions about ideas, to redeem ignored causes, to deflate pomposity, to challenge conventional assumptions, [and] to confront the human consequences of ideas and policies."⁴³ Stewart used profanity as a means to create a diatribe that critiqued lawmakers for denying basic human decency and healthcare for veterans. In this argument, the rhetor cast obstructionist lawmakers as cruel agents of an unjust bureaucracy agnostic to the medical needs of veterans whose lives would be saved by the PACT Act.

Stewart's diatribe also highlighted the cynical and cruel arguments made against passing the PACT Act. To justify blocking the bill, obstructionist Republicans contended the PACT Act was too broad and could be seen as a slush fund for unchecked medical spending. Stewart replied to this accusation, stating, "That's nonsense. I call bullshit."⁴⁴ In order to redirect his anger, Stewart pointed out the hypocrisy of senators who willingly pay to support war efforts but refuse to pay for medical bills incurred by veterans who were harmed in the line of fire. Stewart admonished,

This isn't a slush fund, you know what's a slush fund? The OCO, the Overseas Contingency Operations Fund. \$60 billion, \$70 billion every year on top of \$500 billion,

³⁸ Theodore Otto Windt, "The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58, no. 1 (1972), 7.

³⁹ Windt, *ibid* 7-8.

⁴⁰ Kristen Kennedy, "Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance," *Rhetoric Review* 18, no. 1 (1999), 38.

⁴¹ Kennedy, 39.

⁴² Windt, "The Diatribe," 8.

⁴³ Windt, "The Diatribe," 8.

⁴⁴ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

\$600 billion, \$700 billion of a defense budget. That's a slush fund, unaccountable, no guardrails.⁴⁵

Stewart added that not a single one of the lawmakers who voted to block the PACT Act ever voted against funding for the defense department. Stewart declared, "They vote for it year after year after year. You don't support the troops. You support the war machine. That's all you care about. Boy, they haven't met a war they won't sign up for. And they haven't met a veteran they won't screw over. What the fuck are we?"⁴⁶

In contrast with lawmakers who voted for supporting the military-industrial complex and against veterans, Stewart cast the situation surrounding the PACT Act in an existential frame. By asking his audience to think about their values and what they support, Stewart raised a chief concern in his diatribe. Rather than just pushing blame strictly onto Republican senators, Stewart compelled his audience to consider their own complicity in voting for cruel politicians who voted against the welfare of the humans who help keep the country safe. By asking his audience, "what the fuck are we," Stewart's use of the diatribe tapped into the broad public support for the PACT Act and partisan lawmakers' failure to get it across the finish line. In order to move forward and reclaim an American identity, Stewart challenged his audience, as well as all politicians, to recognize their cruelty and harm against veterans. If lawmakers and citizens wanted to honor veterans, as well as the country's foundational principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, change from America's current state was necessary.

Creating an Alternative to Cruel Partisan Gamesmanship

Although Stewart's speech stressed the need to pass the PACT Act, his argument also advocated for citizens to examine their ideological values to help cure the scourge of partisanship that corrupted Washington. According to Burke, rhetors can argue for change by constituting guilt to help motivate humans into action when a particular ill conflicts with an individual's piety to certain ideological principles.⁴⁷ By shaming senators who blocked the PACT Act for partisan purposes and asking rhetorical questions to citizens, Stewart's speech constituted a sense of guilt about abandoning the welfare of veterans. Emphasizing guilt surrounding the abandonment of veterans provided Stewart a nonpartisan foundation to advocate for change because partisanship stood in the way of legislation that was widely popular among the American people. To rhetorically advocate for change, Stewart, first, highlighted citizens' complicity in failing veterans, and second, stressed the need to reject the system of partisan gamesmanship that allowed this situation to exist.

In Burke's framework, in order to cure an ill inflicting guilt on society, individuals must first introspectively become aware of what ideological principles they may be pious to—even some that may be in conflict.⁴⁸ In understanding human motives, Burke explains that ideological principles help individuals craft a frame that guides or misguides their actions and communication.⁴⁹ As a whole, piety to a variety of ideological concepts creates a unique frame that allows individuals

⁴⁵ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁴⁶ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁴⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 76.

⁴⁸ See Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

⁴⁹ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 76.

to prioritize their actions. Burke explains that through these frames, we humans can “derive our vocabularies for the charting of human motives. And implicit in our theory of motives is a program of action, since we form ourselves and judge others (collaborating with them or against them) in accordance with our attitudes.”⁵⁰ As such, when a situation arises that causes guilt, individuals must re-examine their piety to certain ideological principles to determine where there may be a conflict. One path forward is to reframe one’s ideological principles by rejecting or downplaying one ideology over another. Rhetorical advocacy, like that of Stewart’s, can prompt audiences to re-examine their own ideological preferences. In order for social change to occur, Burke stress that a “*shift in the allegiance to symbols of authority*” and purging a harm or ill from one’s individual frame can help transform the social world.⁵¹ By using the guilt surrounding the failure of veterans as a foundation, Stewart’s rhetoric stressed the need to not only pass the PACT Act, but also reject partisan gamesmanship lawmakers used to place the legislation in jeopardy.

Stressing the need for transformation, Stewart pointed to the conflict between partisan gamesmanship and a bill with widespread bipartisan support. Stewart’s speech stressed that mortification or self-sacrifice was a means to push for social change by making guilt an issue. In turn, the PACT Act could be passed and the roots for underlying social change, where partisan gamesmanship was rejected, would be planted. Burke explains that mortification asks audience members to engage in personal sacrifice within their own ideological frame to ameliorate something causing social guilt. This rhetorical tactic helps constitute a future world by having individuals accept their responsibility for creating a social ill that has caused guilt and disorder.⁵² Within the framework, individuals do not merely seek to scapegoat something external to their own ideological frame. Instead, Burke writes, “For ‘mortification’ does not occur when one is merely ‘frustrated’ by some external interference. It must come from within. The mortified must, with one aspect of himself, be saying no to another aspect of himself.”⁵³ Burke adds,

[M]ortification [is] a kind of governance, an extreme form of “self-control,” the deliberate, disciplinary “slaying” of any motive that, for “doctrinal” reasons, one thinks of as unruly. In an emphatic way, mortification is the exercising of oneself in “virtue”; it is a systematic way of saying no to Disorder, or obediently saying yes to Order.⁵⁴

Mortification via rhetorical advocacy allows a rhetor to highlight an external force causing social guilt, all while encouraging individuals to reject this principle from their own ideological frame to move forward. In short, rhetors use mortification to ask audiences to accept their responsibility for contributing to a social ill. Olson describes the value of mortification for advocates, explaining that this rhetorical strategy provides audiences with “a new commitment to a more virtuous way of life.”⁵⁵ Through mortification rhetors point out a social ill, explain its destructive nature, and ask individuals to self-discipline their own ideological frame in order to purge this harm that has disrupted a community. Thus, rhetors who use mortification help create a sense of guilt in their audience, all while providing a choice on how to move forward. In Stewart’s speech,

⁵⁰ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 92.

⁵¹ Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 21-22, emphasis in original.

⁵² Brummett, “Burkean Scapegoating,” 255.

⁵³ Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 190.

⁵⁴ Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 190.

⁵⁵ Olson, “Rhetorical Leadership and Transferable Lessons for Successful Social Advocacy in Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*,” 96.

guilt was constituted via a diatribe that pointed fingers at senators who corrupted Washington via partisan gamesmanship and citizens who were complicit by voting and standing by these lawmakers. To move beyond this state of guilt, and constitute a realignment of one's ideological frame, Stewart advocated that politicians and citizens engage in an act of mortification by publicly rejecting partisan gamesmanship, the social ill that led to the PACT Act's failure.

To help create a new sense of order and mortify, Stewart's diatribe split the political scene surrounding the PACT Act into two dimensions. By using dissociation, Stewart was able to change

the prevailing understanding of a concept by simultaneously transforming and partially preserving its differentiated elements. Thus, dissociation does not break the links uniting already-independent elements of a concept; instead it profoundly converts and prioritizes the elements in decoupling them.⁵⁶

In other words, dissociation allowed Stewart to break away the threatening parts of the current political scene, distancing it from his more optimistic vision.⁵⁷ In the aftermath of the PACT Act's failure, Stewart used the constraints of his rhetorical situation to split politics into two distinct parts: 1) inhumane and cruel partisan gamesmanship that disregarded the welfare of America's troops, versus 2) humane support for veterans and common-sense politics grounded in the foundational beliefs of the country. Stewart's use of dissociation cast cruel partisan gamesmanship as a short-term political win that only benefited a political party. In contrast, Stewart's argumentative strategy allowed him to prioritize common sense and support for U.S. troops. In this positive framework of politics, Americans could reconstitute the nation according to its founding principles, as well as help provide life-saving healthcare to veterans. The choice citizens had to make was to place supporting veterans over party piety that only favored partisan gamesmanship.

To highlight how intransigent senators were against the interests of veterans and American citizens, Stewart noted the division between the rhetoric of politicians and their actions. Stewart stated, "Pat Toomey says I've got veterans groups behind me. I call bullshit." Pointing behind him at a crowd, Stewart continued, "These are the veterans' groups, VFW, American Legion, IAVA, Wounded Warriors, DAV, AMVETS. They're all here. This is the veterans' community, senator. They don't stand behind you. In fact, you won't let them stand in front of you."⁵⁸ Unlike veterans who Stewart labeled as vulnerable humans, obstructionist lawmakers were cast as villains who lacked human sympathy. Invoking a character attack, Stewart stated,

Cowards, all of them. And now they say, well, this will get done. Maybe after we get back from our summer recess, maybe during the lame duck, because they're on Senate time. Do you understand you live around here. Senate time is ridic. These motherfuckers live to 200. They're tortoises. They live forever. And they never lose their jobs. And they never lose their benefits. And they never lose all those things.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Kathryn M. Olson, "Dissociation," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, ed. Theresa Enos (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 196.

⁵⁷ Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 411-459.

⁵⁸ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁵⁹ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

Stewart's diatribe against lawmakers didn't just call these senators names, his rhetoric placed them in a different reality that failed veterans and ignored American's support for the PACT Act.

Stewart contrasted the inhumane and cruel acts of partisan lawmakers with the suffering of wounded veterans due to Congressional inaction, stating,

Well, they're [veterans] not on Senate time. They're on human time, cancer time. Don't you have families. Don't you have people who are deciding how to live their last moments? I know some of them. They've been down here advocating with us. They've spent their remaining time advocating so that other soldiers didn't have to face the indignities and the depravity and the desperation that they faced.⁶⁰

To further dehumanize partisan lawmakers, Stewart highlighted their cruel treatment of veterans for partisan purposes. He chided their actions, stating, "And none of them will hear it, and none of them care except to tweet. Boy, they'll tweet it. Can't wait to see what they come up with on Veterans Day. On Memorial Day. Well, this is the reality of it."⁶¹ In Stewart's diatribe, partisan senators were admonished for using veterans as a convenient symbol to embrace patriotism. Rather than honoring veterans with life-saving care for their sacrificial duty, Stewart mocked Senators who claimed to support the troops when it was politically advantageous yet turned their backs at other times in order to claim a partisan victory.

To humanize wounded troops and further cast partisan senators as cruel villains, Stewart highlighted the activism of some veterans on behalf of themselves and others fighting for their lives. Stewart proclaimed,

Every one of these individuals that has been fighting for years, standing on the shoulders of Vietnam veterans who have been fighting for years, standing on the shoulders of Persian Gulf War veterans fighting for years. Desert Storm veterans. To just get the health care and benefits that they earned from their service.⁶²

Stewart painted veteran advocates as leaders for their movement. Collectively, these troops not only endured a battle overseas, but also a fight in their own country to secure adequate and life-saving healthcare. Stewart admonished the country for putting these men and women in this situation by supporting politicians who engaged in partisan gamesmanship. Stewart professed,

And I don't care if they were fighting for our freedom. I don't care if they were fighting for the flag. I don't care if they were fighting because they wanted to get out of a drug treatment center or it was jail or the army. I don't give a shit. They lived up to their oath. And yesterday [partisan senators] spit on it in abject cruelty.⁶³

Blaming partisan senators, Stewart profanely preached of the need for the country to come to its senses, pass the PACT Act and help veterans try to get back to a normal way of life. Although the PACT Act was one step, Stewart explained,

⁶⁰ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁶¹ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁶² The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁶³ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

These people thought they could finally breathe. You think their struggles end because the PACT Act passes? All it means is they don't have to decide between their cancer drugs and their house. Their struggle continues.⁶⁴

Stewart explained that the PACT Act was just one way for Americans to honor those who fought for the freedom of citizens. Despite the cost or politics, Stewart proclaimed that the most humane and American act lawmakers and citizens could do is provide veterans with a chance at a normal life after witnessing the horrors of war.

By encouraging his audience to engage in the act of mortification, Stewart's rhetoric required his audience to make a choice about the kind of America they wanted to live in. He explained, "I honestly don't even know what to say anymore. But we need your help because we're not leaving."⁶⁵ To demonstrate the difference between veterans fighting for the passage of the PACT Act and cruel lawmakers, Stewart highlighted the latter's callousness by stressing that they were days away from a Congressional vacation. Stewart pointed out this hypocrisy by stating,

I don't know if you know this. You know, obviously, I'm not a military expert. I didn't serve in the military. But from what I understand, you're not allowed to just leave your post, when the mission isn't completed. Apparently, you take an oath, you swear an oath, and you can't leave. But these folks can leave because they're on Senate time. Go ahead. Go home. Spend time with your families because these people can't do it anymore. So they can't leave until this gets done. Because these people will not give up. They will not give in and they will not relent.⁶⁶

For Stewart, the future of the Republic rested on regular Americans' commitment to saving the country from the contamination of cruel politicians. He explained, "This is an embarrassment to the Senate, to the country, to the founders and all that they profess to hold dear. And if this is America First, then America is fucked."⁶⁷ Sarcastically deploying "America First," one of former President Donald Trump's policy names, Stewart cast the current situation as a national embarrassment. Aligning the cruel actions of obstructionist senators with the former president, Stewart pointed out the hypocrisy of claiming to put America first, yet failing to support the people on the front lines who protect the country. Casting the situation as a national embarrassment, Stewart's speech marked the PACT Act's blockage as an existential dilemma for citizens. In the wake of July 28, 2022, Americans could choose to push Congress to pass the PACT Act and hold cruel partisan politicians responsible. Or, Americans could stand by the current course, leading to a path of destruction and abandonment of America's foundational principles.

⁶⁴ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁶⁵ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁶⁶ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!"

⁶⁷ The Problem with Jon Stewart, "I Call Bullshit!" Jon on the PACT Act Being Blocked by the Senate," July 28, 2022,

Conclusion

Following his speech in July, Stewart continued his advocacy for the PACT Act in the media, appearing on news networks ranging from MSNBC to Fox News.⁶⁸ Despite stalling in the Senate on July 28, 2022, the PACT Act was passed by Congress on August 2, 2022 and signed into law by President Joe Biden on August 10, 2022. As of the spring of 2023, more than half a million veterans and their surviving family members have filed claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for toxic exposure benefits covered under the PACT Act.⁶⁹ Stewart's activism on behalf of this cause did not go unnoticed. At the signing ceremony, President Biden praised Stewart's activism, stating, "You refused to let anybody forget. You refused to let them forget. And we owe you big, man. We owe you big."⁷⁰ Senator Chuck Schumer praised Stewart's activism thanking the comedian for "put[ting] the pressure on people to turn their votes around."⁷¹

Deploying uncivil and profane rhetoric, Stewart's speech used a nonpartisan argument that offered lawmakers and citizens a choice: to fulfill the country's founding principles and promises to veterans or to continue support of cruel partisan gamesmanship. If citizens continued to play into partisan gamesmanship, not only would the country deprive its troops of lifesaving healthcare, but the country would jeopardize its underlying foundational protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Stewart's rhetorical leadership highlights a few transferable lessons for the field of rhetorical studies and social advocates. First, Stewart's diatribe highlights how incivility and profanity can be used to generate headlines in the media and call attention to a complex problem. Despite never having served in the military, Stewart was able to use his celebrity ethos and rhetorical style to spur politicians and the public sphere into action on a popular piece of legislation that stalled in Congress due to partisan gamesmanship.

Second, Stewart's profane rhetoric reframed the exigency of the PACT Act by casting veterans as vulnerable victims of cruel politicians. As such, Stewart's rhetoric shifted the public conversation from referring to veterans as heroes in charge of protecting the country, to being vulnerable Americans in need of help. While Stewart reconstituted veterans as vulnerable humans, this tactic has also notably been used for other groups traditionally regarded as heroes in the public sphere. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors and nurses were frequently propped up as heroes saving the world. At the same time, parts of the public dismissed pleas to wear masks or get vaccinated to help protect these lifesavers. Stewart's reframing of veterans as vulnerable Americans can serve as a model for advocates seeking to help groups that are traditionally constituted as heroes, particularly at times when they put their own lives in jeopardy.

Finally, Stewart's use of incivility and profanity highlight how to use strategic rhetoric for the purposes of passing a bill popular with the American people, all while urging citizens to reconsider where their true ideological commitments lie. In Stewart's speech, the rhetor challenges Americans

⁶⁸ Abigail Covington, "Jon Stewart is Right to be Pissed about the PACT Act," *Esquire*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a40772443/jon-stewart-ted-cruz-pact-act/>.

⁶⁹ The American Legion, "More than 500,000 PACT Act Claims Already Filed with VA," *The American Legion*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.legion.org/veteransbenefits/258828/more-500000-pact-act-claims-already-filed-va>

⁷⁰ Quoted in Kate Sullivan, "Biden Signs Bill Expanding Health Care Benefits for Veterans Exposed to Toxic Burn Pits," *CNN*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/10/politics/biden-burn-pits-bill-signing/index.html>

⁷¹ Quoted in Chris Murphy, "PACT Act Passes After Jon Stewart Flames Republican Lawmakers," *Vanity Fair*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/08/pact-act-passes-after-jon-stewart-flames-republican-lawmakers>

to use this case study to realign their ideological frame to place the lives of humans and support for America's military over obscene and cruel partisan gamesmanship. Stewart's tactics highlight Johnstone's argument that rhetoric can serve as a wedge for personal and public transformation. Johnstone explains that at its core, rhetoric is "the art of getting attention" or "how to wake [an audience] up and cause [them] to take notice of the objects around [them] and the theses that are begin addressed to [them]."⁷² Acting as a wedge, rhetoric provides audiences a means to respond to an exigency while confronting their own beliefs and values. Yoos elaborates on Johnstone's notion of rhetoric from an audience perspective by stressing that a rhetorical appeal puts them on the defensive, asking them to consider their values and beliefs. He explains that rhetoric "wedges open the consciousness of the percipient to considerations of self-consistency about the percipient's feelings, attitudes, beliefs, commitments, and actions."⁷³ Stewart's profane comments may have caused media attention, but the substance of his message carried bipartisan weight. While Stewart's invective attacks may have been against cruel lawmakers, the rhetor reframed the issue as an attack against veterans and the American system. By stressing the need to provide healthcare and support for America's troops, Stewart's argument cast the issue as an existential dilemma of supporting cruel partisan gamesmanship that worked against veterans and the American people or fulfillment of the country's foundational principles by recognizing the common humanity of veterans.

In a contentious public sphere populated by partisan actors, rhetoric can act as a wedge when it taps into broader values that can carry bipartisan weight for the American people. Hauser explains the merit of using rhetoric as a wedge, stating, "Because divergent perspectives make consensus unlikely, those meaning likely to have rhetorical salience are those producing solutions interdependent partners regard as acceptable for their own reasons."⁷⁴ Stewart's rhetoric provided a response to the blockage of a popular bill by stressing the need to support broad nonpartisan American values. Through mortification and a dissociation argument, Stewart's rhetorical strategy demonstrates how a rhetor can transcend partisan piety into a choice of supporting a cruel system that neglects vulnerable citizens or ideological principles that are at the core of what it means to be an American. Stewart's speech may not ask citizens to compromise their preferred beliefs on certain issues, instead, his rhetoric emphasizes that protecting the foundational values of the country is a paramount feature of what it means to be an American. Thus, even though Americans may have various policy and partisan preferences, Stewart's profane rhetoric demonstrates how a rhetor can create an argument with bipartisan appeal that stresses the need to protect core American values rather than cruel and hypocritical partisan gamesmanship.

⁷² Henry W. Johnstone, "Response," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 20, no 2 (1987), 130.

⁷³ George E. Yoos, "Rhetoric of Appeals and Rhetoric of Response," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 20, no 2 (1987), 113.

⁷⁴ Gerald A. Hauser, "Civil Society and the Principle of the Public Sphere," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 31, no. 1 (1998), 36.